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Gribben, C. (2015). Scottish Romanticism, evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827). *Romanticism*, 21(1), 25-36. <https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2015.0208>

Published in:
Romanticism

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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Scottish Romanticism, evangelicalism and Robert Pollok's *The Course of Time* (1827)*

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Keywords: Milton, Pollok, evangelicalism, Scotland, Blackwood, popular literature

The recent revival of interest in Scottish Romanticism has returned to the question of the particularities of national public spheres in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and to the role of religion in the construction of these public spheres.¹ The issues are certainly pressing. Throughout the period, religious themes were generally more important to Scottish writers than they were to their English contemporaries, and Scottish religion functioned and was structured in ways quite distinct from the varieties of English religiosity with which historians and especially literary critics are often most familiar.² Recent work on religion and Scottish Romanticism has drawn attention to these contexts and to the complex series of relationships between religion and writing

* This article is an output of the “Radical Religion in the trans-Atlantic world, 1550-1800” project, which is funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences Collaborative Project Scheme (2012-13). I am grateful to David Finkelstein and Estelle Haan for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ See, especially, Gerard Caruthers and Alan Rawes (eds), *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (Cambridge, 2003); Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (eds), *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2004); Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford, 2008); Andrew Monnickendam, ‘The Scottish national tale’, in Murray Pittock (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism* (Edinburgh, 2011), 100-111; and, for a broader view, Daniel E. White, ‘Idolatry, evangelicalism, and the intense objectivism of Robert Southey’, *Romanticism*, 17.1 (2011): 39–51.

² Herbert F. Tucker’s discussion of Robert Pollok’s *The Course of Time* (1827) identifies membership of the Church of England as being an element of ‘Britishness’, thus excommunicating from this national identity all English dissenters, members of the Scottish established church, and, ironically, the author of the very poem he is discussing; ‘Epic’, in Richard Cronin et al (eds), *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 2002), 25-41, 34-35.

in the period. This work has initiated a reconsideration of religion's role and effect on literary writing.³ There are critical benefits to be gained from this kind of effort, as has been illustrated in scholarship on Hazlitt, for example, which has demonstrated the value of developing new readings of canonical texts within unexpected religious contexts.⁴ But the sidelining of theological concerns by several generations of critics of Scottish literature now means that this effort to reconsider the role and effect of religion on literary writing must precede the recovery of a properly historicised reading of the national canon.⁵ There existed a series of complex relationships between religion and Scottish Romantic writing. But this national particularity did not limit the readership of these texts: some of those Scottish Romantic writers who engaged most seriously with theological ideas generated an international audience, sometimes of extraordinary proportions. And yet so much of their work has been forgotten.⁶ This essay will consider the relationship between Scottish Romanticism and evangelicalism by tracing the popularity and critical eclipse of Robert Pollok's epic poem, *The Course of Time* (1827).

³ See, for example, Crawford Gribben, 'James Hogg, Scottish Calvinism and literary theory', *Scottish Studies Review*, 5.2 (2004), 9-26; Crawford Gribben, 'Religion and Scottish Romanticism', in Murray Pittock (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism* (Edinburgh, 2011), 112-23.

⁴ Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style* (London, 1998); see also Robert M. Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789-1824* (Cambridge, 1997); Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford, 2005); Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge, 2006); and Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia, 2007).

⁵ See Crawford Gribben, 'The literary culture of the Scottish reformation', *Review of English Studies*, 57.228 (2006), 64-82.

⁶ Scholars are beginning to recover other of the forgotten texts of Scottish Romanticism; see Angela Esterhammer, 'London periodicals, Scottish novels, and Italian fabrications: *Andrew of Padua*, the *Improvvisatore* re-membered', *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.3 (2009), 469-90.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the difficulty in reconstructing the role of religion in Scottish Romanticism may be found in the reception history of one of the period's best-selling texts. *The Course of Time* (1827) was a response to *Paradise Lost* published in blank verse and in ten books to extraordinary popularity by its author, Robert Pollok (1798-1827). Its content described death, judgement, heaven and hell with a postmillennial vision of the impending betterment of the religious condition of humanity: the opening invocation of the poem appeals to the 'Eternal Spirit! God of truth!' to inspire the writer 'while I of things to come, / As past, rehearsing, sing the Course of Time, / The second birth, and final doom of man.'⁷ Blackwood, the publisher of the poem, recognised its commercial potential when he bought the rights from the unknown author for the remarkable sum of £2,500.⁸ It would prove to be a wise investment: *The Course of Time* sold 11,000 copies in seven editions in its first year, became one of the four poetry blockbusters of the early nineteenth century, and was kept in print for many decades by publishers throughout the English-speaking world.⁹ The popularity of the poem was confirmed by the regularity of its appearance in commonplace books of the Romantic period.¹⁰ Even in the 1860s, successive Blackwood editions of the poem were routinely selling out. The Blackwood ledgers, held in the National Library of Scotland,

⁷ Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time* (Edinburgh, 1844), i. 1, 10-12.

⁸ Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge, 1990), 86.

⁹ According to Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public* (1957; repr. Columbus, 1998), 386-87, the other candidates were works by Scott and Byron as well as Keble's anonymously published *The Christian Year* (1827), but see the qualification of this argument in Michael F. Suarez and Sarah M. Zimmerman, 'John Clare's career, "Keats's publisher," and the early nineteenth-century English book trade', *Studies in Romanticism*, 45.3 (2006), 380; Paula R. Feldman, 'The poet and the profits: Felicia Hemans and the Literary Marketplace', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 46 (1997), 169.

¹⁰ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, 2004), 227.

record that a high-end illustrated edition of the poem (1857), which was marketed for 21 shillings, began to sell in December 1856 and had sold out by June 1873, netting a profit of £186. Standard editions sold for five shillings in hardback and one shilling in cloth. A hardback edition began to sell in November 1860 and sold 3,318 units by February 1863, with a profit of £192. A hardback twenty-fourth edition began to sell in February 1863, and sold 2,283 units by January 1870, resulting in a profit of £203. A cheaper cloth edition, priced at one shilling, began to sell in June 1868, and sold 10,504 units by December 1873, with a profit of £184. And a cheaper hardback, priced at 3/6 and 4 shillings, began to sell in January 1869, and sold 3,233 units by December 1872, with a profit of £99. Despite their substantial print runs, each of these editions sold out to within less than ten copies.¹¹ William St Clair has estimated that the total sales of the poem reached 78,000 copies by 1869, with a later undated inscription noting sales of 84,000.¹² *The Course of Time* had become what every publisher dreamed of having on their list – a steady seller, even decades after its first appearance.

These Blackwood figures are impressive, but they cannot account for the totality of the poem's sales. Competing editions abounded in North America, where rival editors worked to provide the text with the pseudo-scholarly apparatus that would lend *The Course of Time* so much of its early credibility. American editions provided substantial helps for readers, including topical concordances, thematic indexes and abstracts at the heads of each book, highlighting the poem's affinities with scholarly editions of *Paradise Lost*.¹³ Rev. William Jenks prepared a memoir of the author, as well as

¹¹ As the publishing ledgers in the Blackwood archive, National Library of Scotland, commence in the 1850s, earlier sales figures are not available. I owe this information to David Finkelstein, email correspondence 8 October 2012.

¹² St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, 630.

¹³ Blackwood published a seventh edition in 1828 and a third American edition, based on a third Edinburgh edition, was published in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore in 1829; a 'revised edition' was published by Grigg, Elliot & Co. in Philadelphia in 1829. On the 1857 illustrated edition, see Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge, 1990), 87.

a topical analysis of the poem and an index of its 'principal passages, sentiments, or descriptions' in the third American edition (1828).¹⁴ The edition prepared by W. C. Armstrong (1848) provided a new memoir of the author, an analysis of each of the poem's books, a division of the subjects of the poem, and a much more comprehensive index.¹⁵ More detailed biographical accounts were prepared by David Pollok, the poet's brother (1843), and by James Scott, a Reformed minister from Newark, New Jersey (1848).¹⁶ Twenty years after the publication of *The Course of Time*, and his death, Pollok had become a celebrity, and his poem was being recognised as a staggering achievement.

Nevertheless, perhaps because the robust theological interests of *The Course of Time* challenge so many of the established canons of the criticism of Scottish Romanticism, the poem is now almost universally forgotten.¹⁷ Though it is excerpted in Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew: Poetry in the West of Scotland from the French Revolution to the First World War* (1990),¹⁸ the poem is not mentioned even in the most definitive accounts of the national canon: the three-volume *Aberdeen History of Scottish Literature* (1988) remembers Pollok only as being among 'a host of lesser figures'

¹⁴ Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time*, ed. William Jenks (Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, 1828).

¹⁵ Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time*, ed. W. C. Armstrong (Hartford, CT, 1848).

¹⁶ David Pollok, *The life of Robert Pollok* (Edinburgh, 1843); James Scott (ed.), *The Life, Letters and Remains of the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M.* (New York, 1848).

¹⁷ The only modern critical work on the poem appears to be Julie Nall Knowles, 'The Course of Time: A Calvinistic Paradise Lost', *Milton Studies*, 18 (1983), 173-93, though the poem is also discussed in Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, 86-90 and *passim*; and Tucker, 'Epic', 34-35.

¹⁸ Tom Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew: Poetry in the West of Scotland from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh, 1990), 104-110.

producing 'escapist and reductive fiction,'¹⁹ and the three-volume *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2006) does not mention him at all. Philip Lockley's recent account of *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England* (2013) remembers Pollok as a friend of the future religious radical, James Elishama Smith.²⁰ The strange fate of this best-selling artefact of early nineteenth-century Scotland is representative of the disappearance from scholarly view of elemental components of the cultural movement from which it emerged.

II

The details of Pollok's life can be rapidly collected from his early biographers and from his more recent entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.²¹ Pollok was born on 19 October 1798 in Eaglesham, Renfrewshire, and suffered the first symptoms of the illness later identified as consumption while a pupil in Mearns parish school. Pollok abandoned a career in cabinet-making to work on his father's farm until 1815, when he and his elder brother, David, determined to become ministers in the Secession Church. Pollok began writing blank verse while preparing for his university entrance exams at Fenwick parish school. He entered the University of Glasgow in 1817, around the same time that he began his life-long habit of daily reading from *Paradise Lost*.²² He graduated with his MA in 1822, and studied theology in the Divinity Hall of the United Secession Church and the University of Glasgow from 1822 until 1827. Pollok founded a literary society while attending the

¹⁹ Douglas Gifford, 'Myth, parody and dissociation: Scottish fiction, 1814-1914', in Douglas Gifford (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature*, 3 vols, gen. ed. Cairns Craig (Aberdeen, 1988), iii. 233.

²⁰ Philip Lockley, *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism* (Oxford, 2013), 149-151.

²¹ Sarah Couper, 'Pollok, Robert (1798-1827)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22481>, accessed 8 Oct 2012].

²² Knowles, 'The Course of Time: A Calvinistic Paradise Lost', 175.

university, and his papers, currently held in the Glasgow University Library, contain a printed copy of a *Monody on the Death of Mr William F. Durant, Late Student of the University of Glasgow, by a Student* (1821) – an anonymous text with the production of which Pollok may have been involved.²³ What is certain is that it was during this period (1824-26) that Pollok completed *The Course of Time*. In November 1826, he sent the poem to Blackwood, who bought the text and published it in March 1827. But Pollok's illness was worsening. He was licensed as a probationer in May 1827 by the synod of his denomination, and preached four sermons, three of them in the home of a fellow minister Dr Belfrage, whom he was living, and where he was visited by the elderly Henry Mackenzie. Pollok's doctors recommended foreign travel, and in summer 1827 he set out with his sister for Italy. But physicians in London declared him unfit to travel. The siblings found accommodation in Southampton, where Pollok succumbed to consumption and died on 18 September – the very incarnation of the mythical 'lad o'pairs.'

Pollok was an established author before the publication of *The Course of Time*. His work, as might be expected, had been heavily influenced by the religious environment in which he had developed. His writing had drawn upon the Calvinism of his theological education at the United Secession Divinity Hall. Pollok had studied in the Divinity Hall with John Dick, one of the foremost theologians of his denomination, who had been awarded a D.D. from Princeton in 1815, and whose theological lectures would be posthumously published and would become a standard textbook of Reformed divinity (1834).²⁴ As its author's education might lead one to expect, *The Course of Time* articulates a robust commitment to the piety and polemic of the Scottish Reformed tradition in a form that draws upon established classics in the canon of English literature and the cultural modes of Romanticism. Pollok's earlier work had included a tale of Covenanting times, *Helen of the Glen*

²³ Glasgow University Library MS GEN 1355/4.

²⁴ John R. McIntosh, 'Dick, John (1764–1833)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7594>, accessed 8 Oct 2012].

(1824), and the success of *The Course of Time* encouraged publishers to print other of his Covenanting fiction, *The Persecuted Family* (1828) and *Ralph Gemmell* (1829).²⁵

These novels were, of course, intervening in a literary-historical debate about the Covenanters, a debate which had begun when Scott's *Old Mortality* (1816) had, as one critic put it, 'laid an irreverent hand on the ark of our great national cause, the Covenant.'²⁶ Thomas McCrie, a minister and historian in the denomination within which Pollok was preparing for ordination, was one of the first to note the disparity between the old mythology of the Covenanters and their modern literary reputation. McCrie had reviewed the first volumes of Scott's *Tales of My Landlord* in 1817 to deplore Scott's 'affectation of extensive knowledge of history,' noting the 'blunders which betray the superficiality with which it has been examined.'²⁷ The critique was continued in John Galt's *Ringan Gilhaize* (1823) and in James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). In the same year, in the north-east of Ireland, James McNeight published *A Review of the Brownie of Bodsbeck, with Animadversions on Sir W. Scott's Character of the Scottish Nonconformists, in his tale of "Old Mortality"* (1824) to contrast Scott's representation of 'our persecuted ancestors' as 'wild, extravagant, nonsensical madmen' with Hogg's 'candid delineation of the Nonconformist character.'²⁸ In 1826, Edward Irving, minister of the Scotch Church in London, condemned those 'Episcopalian writers and novelists' who had 'sought to cast the scorn of vulgar

²⁵ Some early commentators erred in their dating of these works – for example, one American memoir stated that the Covenanter fiction was published before the poem; 'Memoir of the author', in Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time, A Poem ... with an enlarged index, a memoir of the author, an introductory notice, and an analysis prefixed to each book*, revised edition (Philadelphia, 1849), xxi.

²⁶ John Galt, 'The Covenanter', *The Steamboat* (1822), 318.

²⁷ Thomas McCrie, Review of 'Tales of My Landlord' (1817), in Thomas McCrie, *Miscellaneous Writings: Chiefly Historical*, ed. Thomas McCrie, Jnr. (Edinburgh, 1841), 251.

²⁸ James McNeight, *A Review of the Brownie of Bodsbeck, with Animadversions on Sir W. Scott's Character of the Scottish Nonconformists, in his tale of "Old Mortality"* (Newry, 1824), iv-v.

ridicule, or to fasten the censure of malignant humours upon these stout resistances and masterful arguments of the Scottish people during the seventeenth century.’²⁹ It was hardly surprising that the first issue of *The Covenanter* (1830) should want to comment on the ‘unmeasured misrepresentation’ in ‘the Periodical press of the day’ of the ‘ancient faith of the Martyrs.’³⁰

Pollok had a personal connection with the Covenanters. Growing up around Eaglesham, he would have heard many of the local accounts of military actions in which radical Presbyterians had been involved. In addition, one of his ancestors, John Gemmell, had been transported to Jamaica for his commitment to the Covenanting cause.³¹ He therefore had personal reason to complain, in *The Persecuted Family: A Tale of the Covenanters* (1828), that the Covenanters ‘are wholly forgotten by many, – their characters ridiculed, and their actions misrepresented, by others, and the courage with which they suffered for our good too little admired by all.’³² Young people, the novel lamented, ‘can scarcely fail to meet with books in which heedless genius has held them forth to laughter ... Many of their lives ... are either written in so antiquated and ungainly a phraseology, as to be noways inviting to the youthful mind; or are blended with circumstances so extraordinary, as to discredit and destroy the effect of what is true.’³³ And perhaps worst of all, Pollok continued, ‘some historians’

²⁹ Edward Irving, ‘The Spiritual Economy of Scotland’ (1826), in G. Carlyle (ed.), *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving* (London, 1864-5), iii. 476.

³⁰ *The Covenanter* 1:1 (December 1830 [wrongly printed 1831]), 1.

³¹ *Inventory of Articles of General Interest connected with Robert Pollok ... Gifted to the Museum in connection with the Kelvingrove Art Galleries by Mr John Pollok and Miss Elizabeth Pollok, 10 Polnoon Street, Eaglesham, Nephew and Niece of the Poet* (1903).

³² Robert Pollok, *The Persecuted Family: A Tale of the Covenanters* (1828; new edition, Edinburgh, 1846), 3. *The Persecuted Family* was published in a new edition by William Oliphant and Sons, Edinburgh, in 1846, presumably to capitalise upon even as it consolidated the ecclesiastical libertarianism of the Disruption and the formation of the Free Church of Scotland (1843).

³³ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 5-6.

represent the Covenanter leaders as the ‘visionary and fanatic leaders of a visionary and fanatic sect.’³⁴ *The Persecuted Family* is nevertheless self-consciously Romantic: one character admires the ‘pure objects of nature’ because of the ‘romantic scenery amidst which his childhood had been nursed.’³⁵ It is also unhesitatingly patriotic, celebrating the ‘sweet melodies of Scotland.’³⁶ ‘If you ever see our father,’ one young martyr exclaims, ‘tell him I died with joy for the liberties and religion of Scotland.’³⁷ But the novel is also strongly anti-Gaelic, with descriptions of a Highland curate who ‘really understood the English language, as well as the Scottish, so ill, that the peasants among whom he was settled, had they been willing to hear him, could have understood little of what he said.’³⁸ A footnote later explains that the ‘curate’s language, which would be ridiculous if introduced as he used it, is here translated into English.’³⁹ Pollok’s Anglophile leanings and his antipathy towards Gaelic culture are perhaps best illustrated in the novel’s chapter headings, which quote Milton, Cowper, Goldsmith’s *Deserted Village*, and, perhaps surprisingly, Henry Hart Milman’s *The Fall of Jerusalem* (1820). But Pollok was evidently also a reader of local poets, including in his novel references to Robert Burns,⁴⁰ James Grahame’s *The Sabbath* (1804), as well as a poem entitled, ‘The Christian soldier’ (1819), by James Montgomery, the Moravian hymn-writer who had been born in Irvine. *The Persecuted Family* contains one anonymous extract, which I have been unable to trace, except in other editions of the novel, and which may have been written by Pollok himself.⁴¹ But it

³⁴ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 55.

³⁵ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 9.

³⁶ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 18.

³⁷ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 83.

³⁸ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 38.

³⁹ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 67; see Kenneth McNeil, *Scotland, Britain, Empire: Writing the Highlands, 1760-1860* (Columbus, 2007).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 51.

⁴¹ Pollok, *The Persecuted Family*, 61.

illustrates Pollok's culturally specific construction of a Romantically infused and canonically aware variety of Scottish Calvinist faith. It is all the more ironic, then, that he chose to model his most enduring work on a poem by one of the greatest critics of the project of covenanted uniformity which the Scottish Presbyterian tradition had pursued – on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.⁴²

II

It was in November 1827 that Pollok's publisher announced his death. The death notice in *Blackwood's Magazine* highlighted the Romantic sensibilities of the text for which the poet would become best known: 'at Devonshire Place, Shirley Common, near Southampton, of consumption, the Rev. Robert Pollok, A.M. aged 28 years, author of the sublime and beautiful poem, recently published, entitled, "The Course of Time."' ⁴³ The notice pointed both to the content of the poem and to its categories of reception, its sublimity and beauty, but also to Blackwood's advertising nous: it could be hard work to continue to sell an edition that had been published just months before its author's death and for which the press had already advanced £2,500.

Blackwood was not to be disappointed. The poem was an immediate sensation. We have already noticed that its sales figures remained impressive throughout successive decades. But *The Course of Time* also enjoyed a literary impact. Pollok's poem provoked Robert Montgomery's *The Omni-presence of the Deity* (1828),⁴⁴ and was alluded to by James Hogg in the *Noctes Ambrosianæ*.⁴⁵ *The Course of Time* was 'regularly imitated,' not least in anonymous *The Last Judgement* (1857), which includes Pollok as a character among the Righteous Bards, and Jean Ingelow's *A Story of Doom*

⁴² See Knowles, 'The Course of Time: A Calvinistic *Paradise Lost*'.

⁴³ *Blackwood's Magazine* 23 (1827), 796.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Hopkins, 'Reflections on Satan Montgomery', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 4.3 (1962), 351-52.

⁴⁵ Alan Lang Strout, 'The *Noctes Ambrosianæ*, and James Hogg', *Review of English Studies*, 13.49 (1937), 62.

(1867). Similarly, in the visual arts, Francis Danby's 'The opening of the sixth seal' (1828) seems to dramatize an important moment in the poem, while the title of Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* (1833-36) may have been influenced by the text.⁴⁶

But not all early readers were equally enthusiastic about *The Course of Time*. The earliest review of the poem in *The London Literary Gazette* lamented that news of the author's death could not change the 'modified praise' which the poem warranted.⁴⁷ The poem was given a fuller but more exacting notice in *The North American Review* (1829), in which its reviewer admitted that he opened the volume with 'no prepossessions. We had never heard the author's name, until we saw an American edition of his work announced. We have since learned that he was a Scottish clergyman, of obscure birth and a feeble frame; that he wrote this poem while at the university, and never distinguished himself by any other production; and finally that he died prematurely at the age of twenty-eight.' If the biographical account was fair, the evaluation of the poem was biting: 'The recollection of these facts should go to soften the severity of criticism, where, under other circumstances, severity would be just. Were the author living, we might reproach him with indiscretion and too much haste to be known. However noble the design, we might reasonably complain of the execution, which might have been greatly improved by retouching and revision.' But now, admitting that 'Providence has interposed' in the author's death, and perhaps realising the sympathy which Pollok's death might solicit, the reviewer drew the inevitable comparisons with Milton and was 'induced to believe that a high place' would be assigned to Pollok 'among the gifted sons of song.'⁴⁸

And critical responses remained mixed. Twenty years after the publication of *The Course of Time*, even advocates of the poem could oscillate in their appreciation of its efforts. In 1842,

⁴⁶ Alan P. Wallach, 'Cole, Byron, and the *Course of Empire*', *The Art Bulletin*, 50.4 (1868).

⁴⁷ *The London Literary Gazette* 558 (29 September 1827), 1.

⁴⁸ *The North American Review* 28:63 (1829), 340-354, 241.

‘Christopher North,’ a nom de plume of *Blackwood’s Magazine* regular John Wilson, described Pollok as possessing

great original genius strong in a sacred sense of religion. Such of his short compositions as we have seen, written in early youth, were but mere copies of verses, and gave little or no promise of power. But his soul was working in the green moorland solitudes round about his father’s house, in the wild and beautiful parishes of Eaglesham and Mearns ... The poet in prime of youth (he died in his twenty-seventh year) embarked on a high and adventurous emprise, and voyaged the illimitable Deep. His spirit expanded its wings, and in a holy pride felt them to be broad, as they hovered over the dark abyss. The “Course of Time,” for so young a man, was a vast achievement. The book he loved best was the Bible, and his style is often scriptural. Of our poets, he had studied, we believe, but Milton, Young, and Byron. He had much to learn in composition; and, had he lived, he would have looked almost with humiliation on much that is at present eulogized by his devoted admirers. But the soul of poetry is there, though often dimly developed, and many passages there are, and long ones too, that heave, and hurry, and glow along in a divine enthusiasm.⁴⁹

Of course, Christopher North’s panegyric itself advanced on the basis of allusion, with its implicit comparison of Pollok, whose ‘spirit expanded its wings, and in a holy pride felt them to be broad, as they hovered over the dark abyss,’ to the Spirit of *Paradise Lost*, who ‘from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad’st it pregnant,’ though the reference to Pollok’s ‘high and adventurous emprise’ perhaps better suited the project of Milton’s Satan.⁵⁰ The uncertain significance of North’s allusions paralleled the

⁴⁹ [John Wilson], *The Recreations of Christopher North*, 3 volumes (Edinburgh, 1842), i. 334.

⁵⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (1968; second edition, Harlow, 2207), 1. 19-22. I owe this reference to Estelle Haan.

ambivalence of other critics. The introduction to a Philadelphia edition of the poem (1849) admitted that 'what the decision of the professed literary critics will be is yet uncertain ... but it will not surprise us, if this Poem shall be assailed with a storm of severest criticism.'⁵¹ After all, the introduction admitted, the poem had 'many faults,'⁵² and the inevitable comparison to Milton could only be unfavourable.⁵³ And it continued to be unfavourable when Thomas McNicoll devoted a substantial chapter to 'Milton and Pollok' in his *Essays on English Literature* (1861).⁵⁴

The ambivalence of the reviewers found its way into the public reputation of the poem. Thirty years after these hesitations, the American historian and novelist Edward Eggleston included a character in *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (1873) who had read *The Course of Time* along with other improving classics, including 'a good deal of Matthew Henry,' the noted biblical commentator, but she 'had not enjoyed them much.'⁵⁵ In the same year, on the other side of the Atlantic, and in a more positive context, Thomas Hardy quoted the poem without acknowledgment in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873).⁵⁶ Almost sixty years later, John Buchan's *Castle Gay* (1930) described a character, who, by the age of nine, had read '*Paradise Lost*, Young's *Night Thoughts*, and most of Mr Robert Pollok's *Course of Time*. At eleven he had himself, to his parents' delight, begun the first canto of an epic on the subject of Eternity.'⁵⁷ But the parody of Buchan's depiction was representing a new mood of light-hearted rejection of the retired classic. *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*

⁵¹ 'Introductory notice', in Robert Pollok, *The Course of Time, A Poem ... with an enlarged index, a memoir of the author, an introductory notice, and an analysis prefixed to each book*, revised edition (Philadelphia, 1849), xxiii.

⁵² 'Introductory notice', in Pollok, *The Course of Time* (Philadelphia, 1849), xxiii.

⁵³ 'Introductory notice', in Pollok, *The Course of Time* (Philadelphia, 1849), xxiv.

⁵⁴ Thomas McNicoll, *Essays on English Literature* (London, 1861), 65-111.

⁵⁵ Edward Eggleston, *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (New York, 1873), 74.

⁵⁶ Thomas Hardy, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, ed. Pamela Dalziel (1873; rpr. London, 2005), 295.

⁵⁷ John Buchan, *Castle Gay* (1930; London, 1972), 28.

(1941) closed its entry on 'Burns and lesser Scottish verse' with 'Pollok's once admired poem, *The Course of Time*, a lengthy discussion in blank verse modelled on Milton. There is no reason for considering it specially Scottish, or valuable, in any sense.'⁵⁸ *The Course of Time* had entered its scholarly – and consequently its cultural – eclipse.

Some early readers of the poem could never have anticipated that move. Of course, they believed, this hostility to the poem could be explained. One editor expected that the 'conscience-riving gleam and flash of truth, which bursts so often and vividly from the verse of Pollok, will arouse the hostility of hearts not subject to the law of God.'⁵⁹ But he was not giving way to despair, for he believed that better times were coming for this kind of Calvinist creativity. Pollok's poem was a 'sort of first fruits' of what Christian readers should expect in the future, the anonymous editor continued, and admirers of Pollok should look to the future, when the 'millennial sons of genius, and lovers of poetry and letters,' would be far more familiar with the 'inspiration' which had attended *The Course of Time*. And during that millennial period, when many more writers would come 'under the regenerating and fertilizing influences of such an inspiration,' Christian readers could anticipate a 'golden harvest of various literature.'⁶⁰ For some readers, the success of *The Course of Time* had become evidence that the millennial age was dawning.

But the millennial age did not commence. Admirers of the poet could erect a monument, near the place of his birth, on 24 September 1900, celebrating 'Robert Pollok, Author of 'The Course of Time' / Born 1798 Died 1827 / He soared untrodden heights and seemed at home.'⁶¹ And in 1903

⁵⁸ George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge, 1941), 600.

⁵⁹ 'Introductory notice', in Pollok, *The Course of Time*, (Philadelphia, 1849), xxvi.

⁶⁰ 'Introductory notice', in Pollok, *The Course of Time*, (Philadelphia, 1849), xxix.

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http://www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/txt/heritage/heritage_database_records/heritage_quick_search/heritage-e-detail.htm?idcall=867&submit=Go&page=8&textsize=undefined, accessed 9 October 2012; Ordnance Survey grid reference NS5152.

the legatees of the poet could find substantial and well-regarded recipients for their gifts of his effects, including Glasgow University Library and the Kelvingrove Art Galleries.⁶² But the reputation of the author was entering its long eclipse. For over half a century, *The Course of Time* had transcended its contexts of production to define something of evangelical experience in the long nineteenth century as it described ‘things to come, / As past, rehearsing, sing the Course of Time, / The second birth, and final doom of man’ (p. 3). But the monument erected to honour its author stands today to mark the changing tastes of the Scottish public sphere. The strange fate of this best-selling artefact of early nineteenth-century Scotland is representative of the disappearance from critical view of elemental components of the cultural movement from which it emerged.

III

This elision of cultural memory can be explained, at least in part. The critical evacuation of religion from the study of Scottish Romanticism has developed in parallel with the evolution of a body of historical scholarship which has downplayed religious variety in the period. Recent work on the rise of evangelicalism has not always paid close attention to geographical variations within the evolving movement. Thus, the work of David W. Bebbington, which has done so much to call attention to the importance of evangelicalism as a social and intellectual phenomenon, has described evangelical religious attitudes in general terms in this period as being dominated by a heightened supernaturalism and an overpowering pessimism as to the future of humanity, a pessimism driven by apprehension as to the impact of political radicalism. Bebbington has argued that this strongly

⁶² *Inventory of Manuscripts of Robert Pollok ... Gifted to Glasgow University Library by Mr John Pollok and Miss Elizabeth Pollok, 10 Polnoon Street, Eaglesham, Nephew and Niece of the Poet* (1903); *Inventory of Articles of General Interest connected with Robert Pollok ... Gifted to the Museum in connection with the Kelvingrove Art Galleries by Mr John Pollok and Miss Elizabeth Pollok, 10 Polnoon Street, Eaglesham, Nephew and Niece of the Poet* (1903). Both items are stored in box 1 of the Pollok archive; Glasgow University Library MS GEN 1355/1.

supernatural and politically pessimistic sensibility was expressed in theological terms in the increasing popularity of premillennial theories of the apocalypse – theories which emphasised that society would become ever more wicked before the sudden and dramatic second coming of Christ inaugurated the utopian period known as the ‘millennium.’⁶³ And this may well have been true in large parts of the English and Irish establishment, though perhaps less markedly so among dissenters. But systems of eschatology developed differently among early nineteenth-century Scottish evangelicals. Scottish Presbyterians across the denominations were slow to adopt the premillennialism that became so popular among clergy of the established churches elsewhere. And while a number of prominent Scottish preachers did adopt premillennial views – among them Edward Irving and Andrew Bonar – many more continued to adhere to the postmillennial expectation of the impending betterment of the conditions of humanity before the second coming of Christ, an eschatological hope which had dominated in earlier periods and is reflected in *The Course of Time*.⁶⁴

The paradox of the existing scholarly consensus is therefore that literary critics have tended to evacuate from their discussion of the period those texts with religious concerns; and that historians have tended to describe those religious concerns without taking account of Scottish particularities. The traditional scholarly consensus on Scottish Romanticism would encourage us to believe that religiously interested texts were marginal to its cultural production, while the contemporary scholarly consensus on the history of evangelicalism would encourage us to believe

⁶³ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 80-86. The spirituality of pessimism may also have contributed to the introspective piety of William Cowper; Jane Darcy, ‘Religious melancholy in the Romantic period: William Cowper as test case’, *Romanticism*, 15.2 (2009), 144-155.

⁶⁴ Crawford Gribben, ‘Andrew Bonar and the Scottish Presbyterian millennium’, in Crawford Gribben and Timothy C. F. Stunt (eds), *Prisoners of hope? Aspects of evangelical millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880* (Carlisle, 2004), 177-202.

that early nineteenth-century Scottish texts which were interested in issues of religious faith should display features which are sometimes entirely other than those which do exist. This may explain the scholarly occlusion of so much Scottish Romantic writing with an evangelical perspective: the unsuspecting literary critic approaches the period looking for species of writing that might never have existed. And, as *The Course of Time* suggests, some of the most notable texts of the period bear little relation to the supposed 'norms' which scholars project back onto its cultural production. Of course, the scholarly occlusion of the poem might also have something to do with its marked lack of ability. But it is striking to observe how the course of time has significantly altered the relationships between Robert Pollok's epic poem and the critical reception of the literary and religious cultures of Scottish Romanticism.